DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 998 CE 047 703

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TITLE Basic Skills and Employment and Training Programs: A Monograph for Local Elected Officials and Private Industry Council Members.
INSTITUTION Center for Remediation Design, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE [86]
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advisory Committees; Basic Skills; Educational Needs; *Education Work Relationship; *Employment Problems; Employment Programs; Federal Government; *Government Role; *Job Training; Local Government; Postsecondary Education; School Business Relationship; Secondary Education; State Government; Unemployment; *Youth Employment
IDENTIFIERS *Private Industry Councils

ABSTRACT

This monograph provides advice for local officials and Private Industry Council (PIC) members about youth employment and unemployment problems and strategies for solving them. The first part of the monograph sketches the problem of unemployment and its roots in a changing economy, youths' lack of basic skills, and the mismatch between the needs of the economy and skills acquired. Following this discussion of the scope of the problem, a short section probes whose responsibility is the solution of the problem and suggests roles for all segments of the community--government, schools, and employers. The paper then suggests strategies for filling the "functional gap" between school and work. Ideas are given for state governments, PICs, and local education offices. A section on setting goals is followed by a discussion on who is served by the plans to be developed. Finally, the monograph suggests the role the federal government can play in a job training system. (KC)

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- The National Job Training Partnership
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ED283998

# BASIC SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAMS: A MONOGRAPH FOR LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS AND PRIVATE INDUSTRY COUNCIL MEMBERS

By Lori Strumpf

for

THE CENTER FOR REMEDIATION DESIGN, A PROJECT OF

THE U.S. CONFERENCE OF MAYORS
THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF BUSINESS
THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF PRIVATE INDUSTRY COUNCILS
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Basic Skills and Employment and Training Programs:
Can the Combination Benefit Employers,
Youth and Community Institutions?

**A monograph for local elected officials and Private Industry Council members.**

The profile of the American work force is changing. Labor market demand is changing. By the turn of the century, if current economic forecasts hold, there will be more jobs available than workers to fill them. Furthermore, while the number of young adults entering the work force is decreasing, a growing percentage of these new workers will lack the basic skills required to fit into available jobs.

As jobs in the service industry continue to increase, the nature of entry level employment is taking on new dimensions. No longer can industry afford employees who cannot read, write, communicate and process information. Employer surveys bear out the fact that employers view these basic academic skills as necessary to an individual's ability to get and keep a job.[1]

However, a mismatch between the jobs available and the skills potential employees bring to those jobs is growing at an alarming rate. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that the number of functional illiterates (those reading between a fourth and eighth grade level) grows by 2.3 million every year -- including 850,000 high school dropouts and another 150,000 "pushouts" who

graduate with inadequate reading and writing skills. The public schools remain avenues to literacy in this country for many Americans, yet it is apparent that the schools lack the ability to capture and motivate a certain type of student -- those with a high risk of dropping out. The National Education Association predicts that 1 out of every 4 students entering the eighth grade in 1986 will not complete high school. Research indicates that many factors play a role in whether a young person will drop out of school including:

* academic history;
* survival factors (marriage, pregnancy, etc.);
* social factors (incarceration; drug dependency, etc.); and
* environmental factors (socioeconomic status, home support, etc.)

Lack of adequate basic skills is not only a middle school and high school dilemma. It effects institutions of higher education as well. Of nearly 1,400 colleges and universities surveyed recently, 84% had established "developmental studies" programs for remedial reading, math, and writing skills. Furthermore, this lack of basic skills adds up to a $25 billion investment in 1985 alone by industry to teach remedial reading, writing, and math. As Paula Duggan and Jacqueline Mazza point out in their report, Learning to Work, for the Northeast-Midwest Institute, these employers' programs are geared to workers already on the

job who demonstrate some capacity for learning. These in house programs are not intended for those who lack a firm grasp of educational fundamentals. Soon, if the problem continues to go unsolved, employers may no longer have a choice. To meet their entry level employment needs, they will have to hire those deficient in basic skills. The problem poses an economic threat and can no longer be viewed as purely a problem of and for educational institutions.

This problem threatens the economic health of our society over the next 20 years. The number of youth (14-24) that will make up the labor force is dwindling in absolute numbers. The numbers of minorities, women and immigrants (14-24) is increasing. Minorities are disproportionately represented within the dropout population. Being a high school dropout decreases job opportunities. Being poor -- as is 1 out of 5 of this nation's youth -- increases the likelihood of dropping out. These same young adults will make up the labor force in the near future, yet right now they take the least advantage of educational opportunities and have little access to work opportunities which teach the skills necessary for productive employment.

U.S. Secretary of Labor William Brock recently observed: "It was intolerable for this country to live with two societies, one black and one white, and we have tried to address that. It was intolerable to have two societies, one male and one female, and we have tried to address that. Now we have two societies, one

literate and one not, and if you are illiterate, it really doesn't matter what your age or sex or religious affiliation is. You cannot be as productive a human being as you would otherwise be." The contention that illiteracy is turning America into a two-class society has severe ramifications for public policy development at the national, state and local level.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT TO ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM?

Over the past year both the Congress and the Department of Labor have articulated their concerns about the apparent basic skills deficiencies among the nation's youth and the economic threat this lack of basic skills poses to the country. The Congress and the U.S. Department of Labor have been searching for policies and programs which will assist the employment and training system to carve out a role in addressing the problem.

The Department of Labor is encouraging Private Industry Councils to include basic skills remediation as part of their employment and training programs. They are doing so by continuing to emphasize services to hard to serve youth through the performance standards setting process as well as other policy memos and guidance letters. The Congress has passed a JTPA amendment supported by the Department of Labor which requires PICs and local elected officials to provide basic skills remediation as

part of the Summer Youth Employment Program.[2] Other youth employment legislation under consideration by the Congress stresses basic skills remediation as a necessary service to increase the employability of youth.

However, while the discussion of the scope of the problem, and potential strategies for addressing this problem have been occurring at the national level, our experience suggests that many PICs and local elected officials are still not sure that strategies involving the employment and training system are the most appropriate responses. Employment and training policymakers frequently ask whose job it is to educate our young people, the employment and training system or the education system? This paper attempts to answer that question with a resounding "BOTH." The question can no longer be "Whose job is it?" Rather the future of the economy depends on identifying roles in the community that a variety of institutions can play to educate those within their communities. It has become apparent that one system alone may not be able to adequately respond to those most at risk. However, collaborative efforts among institutions have proven effective in identifying those at risk and in developing strategies to assist them. These collaborative efforts benefit not only at risk individuals, but enhance the competitive posture of the American economy.

For the employment and training community to find productive avenues for local involvement in addressing the problem of literacy -- the scope of the discussion should be narrowed from literacy to remediation. What's the difference? The call for literacy enhancement is a broad educational directive under which all community strategies to attack basic skills deficiencies ought to emanate. However, literacy is too broad a goal for employment and training to handle alone. Under this broad mandate many programs may take shape, from Headstart programs for preschoolers to programs which bring non-readers to a functional reading level. Remediation on the other hand focuses on correcting or improving one's skill. The job training system is in the business of improving or correcting skill levels for the purposes of getting and keeping a job.

In the context of job training what is meant by basic skills remediation? If employers are telling job training policymakers that basic skills are necessary to get and keep jobs, then basic skills <u>become</u> a pre-employment/work maturity skill. As defined by locally developed youth employment competency systems, pre-employment/work maturity skills are "those skills necessary to get and keep entry level jobs" including filling out applications, being on time and having a positive work attitude.

By addressing basic skills as a preemployment and work maturity skill, employers are identifying a functional gap between what young people learn in school and how these skills apply to the

workplace. The employment and training system can provide functional basic skills as part of the solution to a complex problem.

A recent study done by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) helps to define the functional gap. In this study of 21-25 year olds, the initial news is good. The study found that 95% of all 21-25 year olds can read and understand the printed word at the 4th grade level, and 80% meet or exceed the 8th grade level. However, less than 50% can understand complex material.

What is meant by complex material? In this study literacy is defined as using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. This definition implies an ability to do something rather than knowledge of something.

Authors of The Subtle Danger, a thoughtful analysis of the facts presented in the NAEP study, point out that literacy in and of itself is a functional skill, requiring the application of various skills in common, everyday situations. They conclude that the "literacy skill levels found in the NAEP survey are not adequate, on average, for maintaining world leadership in a changing, technological society at the end of the twentieth century." What the survey found and the analysis illuminates is quite simply that most young people can perform simple

information searches and direct entry of information on a form. But when the very same youth functioning at a high level on simple tasks are asked to perform multistep processes, for example -- computing the change that would be received from $3.00 for two items ordered from a lunch menu -- performance declines. The solution to the above problem requires multiple steps -- finding the two items, adding them up and subtracting from $3.00. Only 56.4 percent did this correctly.

In the Subtle Danger the author's conclusions help to further identify the role for an employment and training system. They identify that "long term programs that focus on critical reading/thinking skills, but skills different from those now emphasized in elementary and secondary reading programs and in job specific occupational training are needed to remedy the situation."

STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR FILLING THE "FUNCTIONAL GAP"

The employment and training system at the national, state and local level can serve as a catalyst for creating change that improves educational opportunities for those youth most at risk of not learning, not working and not earning. To improve educational opportunities, a strategic view must be adopted. The purpose of this strategy is to identify and define how one institution which provides services to youth relates to another.

By doing this a leveraging capacity (offering something the other needs) can be identified. Defining current institutional relationships which identify gaps in services will assist in setting a program strategy resulting in better educational opportunities for youth.

Within this context, elected officials and the private sector at both the state and local level have to approach the policy discussion by looking past institutions and their current roles. Identifying the functions necessary to address the problem will define institutional responsibilities. The problem is that many young people are lacking the ability to take basic skills knowledge and do something with it in "real world" settings. Therefore, both state and local elected officials and private sector policy makers have to develop strategies which constantly make the connection between learning and work.

## For States

To do this, states must find avenues by which different departments responsible for learning and work can communicate with each other. Setting common definitions <u>across</u> institutions for the at-risk population rather than each institution having its own definition is one step in a strategic process at the state level which helps to eliminate communication barriers at the local level.[3] States must also develop policies which create

incentives for multiple institutional responses. Access to additional resources for creating collaborative strategies is one area that should be explored by states as an incentive to local policy making. Ease of access to information as well as monetary resources across state agencies is another area for states to examine. Locally, barriers to joint efforts are hindered when one institution's rules and responsibilities prohibit what another's would allow. Within their own rule making and legislative authority states can chart these differences at the state level and work toward allowing local PICs/SDAs who choose to design a comprehensive work and education strategy to have the flexibility to do so.

## For PICs and LEOs

While PICs and LEOs do not have the authority to direct broad educational policies, resources are available to them which can be used to influence or leverage change. Leveraging can be accomplished through a variety of strategies. One is simply to use money to access other money which when put together has a broader effect than funding just one program. Part of JTPA Title IIA funds, Section 123 or eight percent funds (those funds earmarked in JTPA specifically for education and PIC collaboration) as well as 6% incentive funds can be used to create institutional change.

Leveraging can also be accomplished through strategies which go beyond providing funds. For instance, a community strategy might be developed which would utilize PICs to hold seminars or public forums on issues as they relate to at risk youth, availability of resources, etc. Strategies of this kind can effect change in the name of the public interest. In any case, to accomplish this leveraging for institutional change, a process must be created locally where PICs, LEOs and Education can come to the table to discuss several strategic issues including:

* advantages of institutions working together;
* who is the at risk population (common definition);
* how can they be identified within and between institutions;
* what services do they need;
* what are the functional skills necessary to get and keep jobs; and
* what services can a variety of organizations provide in a joint strategy that none could provide alone.

## Setting Local Strategic Goals

One way to start the development of a local collaborative policy is to develop a common (across institutions) set of strategic planning goals. These goals will grow out of the needs of the community and should be in concert with other institutional planning goals. Once developed and agreed upon as the basis for any joint policies and programs, the framework for policy setting

is in place. Several strategic planning goals which have ramifications for a joint education and employment and training collaborative effort are offered here as examples from which policies and programs can evolve:

* Improving basic skills
* Improving student retention and completion
* Providing educational opportunities to dropouts
* Meeting the skill demands of the private sector
* Linking services into a coherent sequence
* Economic development

## Who Gets Served?

Whether the focus of collaborative efforts will be on in-school youth, out-of-school youth, or both should be decided through the process of strategic goal setting. The role of the employment and training system may be defined differently based on the population to be served.

For in-school youth who are deficient in basic skills the employment and training system brings "work" to these efforts. The ability to provide youth at risk of dropping out with an opportunity to learn about work, to actually participate in work, and to learn basic skills in a functional modality is a

tremendous opportunity to offer the education system as school to work transition strategies are explored. In return, the education system must create a different way of doing business through changes in: curriculum, teaching strategies, classroom structures, etc. The employment and training system may provide additional support for in-school youth who have poor academic histories, little family support and who live in poverty. The school system by itself may not be well equipped to meet the needs of more functional basic skills education.

If the policy development process leads to a focus on dropouts that are deficient in basic skills and therefore at risk of remaining unemployed, the employment and training system may have a more comprehensive role to play. Dropouts entering the employment and training system often lack basic reading and math skills as well as the ability to apply those skills to the world of work. The employment and training community can take the lead in setting strategies to assist this population. These strategies may include:

* Encouraging dropouts to return to school (traditional, adult basic education, vocational education, etc.) combined with a work activity, or
* Providing an alternative learning environment combined with a work activity.

As the community institutions involved in the discussions sort out responsibilities for the dropout population, the employment and training system can provide a second chance strategy for those dropout youth with little access to or interest in traditional educational opportunities.

Engaging in a strategic process will assist PICs and LEOs in setting policies which focus on those youth with basic skills needs. This process will also assist program planners to develop creative programs which respond to the oolicy directives. For instance, articulated policy in this area might allow service delivery areas to utilize the programs identified as exemplary programs (section 205) in JTPA to their full extent.

It must be acknowledged at this point that a national, state and local focus on providing basic skills remediation to JTPA youth may set up tension in a performance driven system. However, the potential payoff of this strategy is two-fold. One may be that more young people accomplish the goals set forth for them. Secondly, developing the policy provides PICs and SDAs with a rationale for requesting adjustments to local performance standards based on who they have chosen to serve and how they propose to serve them.

## For National Policy Makers

Federal policy makers have a continuing responsibility to find ways to articulate the connections between insufficient basic skills among the nation's youth and the economic ramifications. At the federal level, policymakers should identify ways to better access information and resources across institutions. It is one thing to develop legislation or policies that encourage local collaboration, but if the present institutional structures create barriers to access, collaboration will never be effective. Most importantly, the national commitment to teaching young people and preparing them for work must result in clear national goals which include, not exclude, at risk youth. In addition, policymakers should ensure that sufficient resources are available to encourage community institutions to jointly work towards those goals.

While federal policy makers have a responsibility in this arena, state and local governments must seize the initiative to get their institutions working together. Ideally, this should begin at the state level, where the State Job Training and Coordination Council (SJTCC) can enunciate coordination criteria that set out the kinds of roles and responsibilities it expects between the education and job training establishments. If broad coordination criteria are set as a national strategy and more formally articulated as state policy, it sets the stage for change on the

local level. Regardless of whether the state takes the lead, the PIC can pick up the national objectives and become a key player at the community level for sorting out roles and responsibilities. Its membership should already include the key education agencies and community based organizations that should be part of the literacy/remediation process. Given this make-up and in partnership with local elected officials, PICs can serve as the "community" convener for setting out strategic goals.

## CONCLUSION

The need for true education and employment partnerships is before us. Collaboration is never easy, particularly when the effort is focused on creating an ongoing institutional change. However, more is at stake than ever before. The nation's productivity is at stake as a whole generation of young people cannot think through the steps necessary to solve a "complex" problem. The skills necessary to process even simple information and to solve problems are the skills necessary to function in entry level jobs. These are the very skills most young people do not possess.

The job training system has a significant role to play in assisting youth in attaining the basic academic skills necessary to get and keep jobs. The job training system can be a catalyst for bringing community institutions togetner to begin addressing the problem. The job training system can keep the focus on those

youth most at risk of dropping out of school as well as those who have already dropped out. The job training system can develop the functional modality for teaching basic skills which has the potential to change the everyday structure of schools.

The employer community within the employment and training system can develop an articulation process which identifies the functional skills youth need to get and keep jobs. Both systems can use this "identification system" to assess youths' needs when entering either system and in their own credentialing of what a youth has attained with respect to applying basic skills to work.

As William S. Woodside, chairman of American Can Company recently noted, "Many within the business world now know they cannot exist as isolated, autonomous islands, walled off from communities in which they are located. So instead of defining institutional relationships in terms of the barriers and differences that keeps them apart, many corporations are seeking to define their relationships to community institutions in terms of goals and values they share in common." That, it seems, is the challenge for us all as we work toward a productive society where all young people who want to work have not only the opportunity but the skills to do so.

## FOOTNOTES

1. The Vice Presidents Task Force on Youth Employment, Private Sector/Education Roundtables: Summary Report. 1979, p. ii.

This point was made clearly by employers interviewed for the Labor Market Information Network's 1978 report, Employer's Views on Hiring and Training. Annual Report No. 2, 1979, amplifies and updates the Network's 1978 study. A Department of Labor report, Employment and Training Programs for Youth: What Works Best for Whom? May, 1978, defines employability as "first and foremost, a function of attitudes, habits, deportment and general intellectual and manipulative skills, much more than specific occupational skills." (pp. 177-178). An independent survey by the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education came to similar conclusions Giving Youth a Better Chance: Options for Education, Work, and Service, 1979. See also the report of the National Commission of Employment Policy by David Robison, Attitudes of Employers and Business Professionals Towards Government Manpower Programs, 1979, pp. 8-9.

2. The Congress has adopted this strategy based on recommendations and research by many people, including a 1979 study by Barbara Heyns indicating that disadvantaged youth lost basic skills ability over the summer in disproportion to their "advantaged" counterparts. (Summer Learning and the Effects of Schooling. New York: Academic Press)

3. The Wisconsin state legislature recently passed a statute, the Children at Risk Statute, which sets common definitions of at risk youth and also identifies a numerical floor for defining a "high" dropout rate. If an area has a dropout rate which is defined as "high," a plan outlining collaborative strategies to remedy the problem must be submitted to the State Department of Education. While a legislative strategy may be more than most wish to undertake, the principles apply to developing less formal local and/or state agreements.